

## Understanding overhousing policies

“Overhousing” means a person or a family living in a co-op unit that is considered too large for their needs. Who decides if members are overhoused? It can be the members, by approving an overhousing policy for their co-op. Or it may be the government, through restrictions on overhousing in a government-sponsored co-op housing or rent supplement program. A typical co-op overhousing policy may say that no household should have more than one bedroom per person.

A government program standard may go further, for example, requiring couples or younger children of the same sex to share a bedroom.

What happens to a family that is overhoused by one of these standards? Usually it has to move into a smaller unit when one comes open (this is called downhousing).

Overhousing policies are well meant. Co-ops want to make the best use of affordable housing, using their larger units to house larger households.

Downhousing can make subsidy dollars go further. But, unless a government program requires downhousing, an overhousing policy may not always be necessary. For example, if a co-op has high housing charges or difficulty finding new members, it may not wish to worry about matching units to house-hold size. Keeping the co-op full is more important, so the co-op may choose to apply the overhousing rule only to members receiving subsidy.

Of course there are other ways to ration subsidy without moving low-income families to smaller units. For example, a subsidy policy might say that a single person living in a two-bedroom unit gets only the amount of subsidy she or he would get in a one-bedroom unit. This may not be an option for co-ops with rent supplement agreements. But Section 95 (56.1) co-ops can do this.

Some co-ops want to have an overhousing policy but they are not keen on making long-time members move from their family homes as their children grow up and leave. An overhousing policy can address that issue by saying that after a certain number of years, no family will be made to change units unless they are doubly overhoused – a single person living in a three-bedroom, for example.

The situation is more complicated if your co-op is funded by the Ontario government. Recent Ministry reviews of the Provincial Rent Supplement Programs in Ontario identified overhousing as a problem. In some cases co-ops have been told that overhoused households must move or lose their subsidies.

This approach has created a good deal of anxiety in co-op communities, especially in those projects where there are no small units. CHF Canada’s Ontario Region is dealing with the Ministry’s head office on this issue, and will present an update of the situation in an upcoming Ontario Region issue of *Newsbriefs*.

For information on overhousing rules under government programs or sample policies from other co-op, call your local federation or any CHF Canada office.